

ANNUAL REPORT 2017

STAFFORDSHIRE AREA RAMBLERS



Picture: The future? Fortunately its not as bad as it looks as there is a gateway to the left of the picture!)

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Editorial.

This year, in one way, is rather a gloomy one as Council cuts begin to show their effect in the decay of some of our footpaths and some Groups are struggling to either maintain themselves or face a shortage of walks leaders, and this, together with our own budgeting cuts, does not seem to bode well. However on a more positive side, Groups that were struggling last year seem to have overcome their difficulties and are active again. Hopefully more walk leaders will come forward, especially when they find that it is quite a rewarding experience to share a favourite walk or discover a new route that can then be shared.

Chairman's Report.

The Area Council, thanks to the efforts of those who represent their groups or who serve in a specific role, continues to support the work of the groups and to represent all RA members on local and national bodies.

Graham Evans (delegate), Judith Meredith and Cheesewright (observers) attended General Council in April. Owing to my wife's illness I was unable to attend. Graham has reported on General Council to the Area Council. By all accounts it was an unusually amicable gathering!

Last year I reported that Staffordshire County Council was undertaking a review of the management of its countryside sites. So far, the only major outcome is that the management Consall Country Park is being transferred to an unnamed organisation.

I believe that people are prompted to join the RA for one of two reasons. They either want the security and companionship provided by organised group walks and /or a desire to support an organisation dedicated to protecting our rights of way. These objectives of the RA would be unachievable without the countless hours, generously given, by volunteers in our groups and on Area Council. Once again I thank you all for the time you give.

Council budget cuts take their toll on the state of the footpath network throughout Staffordshire and the Metropolitan areas. In Staffordshire footpath maintenance problems are now prioritised in three categories, you can work out for yourselves how likely category three issues are to be resolved! Harry Scott reports that planning issues and disputes are taking longer to resolve as the bureaucracy becomes increasingly stretched. In this scenario the work of the

various group footpath working parties has become an essential contribution to the maintenance of the network. My thanks go to them, without their dedication many of our paths would become unwalkable.

Once again thank you to all of the members of the Ramblers Association in the Staffordshire Area for the work you do on behalf of the Association. Most of what the RA achieves is achieved by local and regional volunteers.

George Greensides, Area Chairman.

Area Secretary's Report

On the 1st & 2nd April I (as Area Delegate), Phil Cheesewright and Judith Meredith (both as Area Visitors) attended the Ramblers General Council meeting which this year was held at Southampton University. This is an annual event which, in effect, is the equivalent of a national AGM meeting for Ramblers. As the Area Delegate I was able to vote, on your behalf, to elect people onto the Board of Trustees, approve the financial accounts and on the vote on the various motions that had been submitted for discussion and due consideration. Besides expressing my own views as and when I felt it necessary, I did, as far as was practicable, consult with Phil and Judith before I cast my vote. This I did because I feel strongly that Staffordshire Area's voice should be taken into account. It may surprise some of our members that Ramblers is much more than a collection of walking clubs but is in fact a national charity. This means that like all other national charities it has to state what its aims and objectives are and then make sure it carries them out so as to comply with the Charity Commissioners regulations for remaining to be a charity. Unlike many other national charities it is the members – you and me- that volunteer our combined time so that Ramblers, nationally, achieves those stated aims and objectives. It is members who organise/run both Group and Area committees through which volunteers then organise the combined walking programmes, group social events and holidays away. It is also volunteers who assist the local authorities by carrying out footpath maintenance work – be that footpath clearance work, replacing old stiles with new ones or indeed replacing old foot bridges with new bridges. To all who offer their free time to the Ramblers locally thank you. The professional staff who, working in the London office are paid the maintain the administration/ financial side of the Ramblers and to assist the local volunteers with the more complex footpath issues such as the long running Andrews case, which

involved a ruling on a footpath that been had created under the 'Inclosure Act' of 1801 but not recorded as such, or the many footpath issues that HS2 is and will create as it is constructed. They also meet with the national politicians to lobby them to make changes in the law so that the public have a greater opportunity to enjoy our countryside.

By and large Ramblers aims to be a democratic organisation but it can only succeed if we all participate at every level of the organisation. There is little point complaining that the wrong decisions have been made on some matter if we do not participate in the first place. If groups repeatedly fail to send representatives to Area meetings and decisions are made that adversely affects them, the question is who are ultimately at fault; those who made decision or those who did not attend the meeting? Given the future political and economic events that are potentially in the pipeline unless we all participate and campaign for our rights to go walking in the countryside then I fear that in time we may find it much more difficult do so. There will be no point moaning and complaining from the sidelines if you have not been involved in the first place!

Finally at the July Area Council meeting George Greensides indicated that after 5 years as Area Chairman he wished to stand down from that post at this year's Area AGM. At the same meeting Harry Scott indicated that he wished to stand down as Area Footpath Secretary at the 2018 Area AGM. Harry informed the meeting that he and I had been in discussions with regards to me taking over as Area Footpath Secretary. I confirmed that I was interested in taking on the post of Area Footpath Secretary but that it would necessitate the need to find someone to replace me as Area Secretary at the 2018 Area AGM. In effect these Area Committee changes mean that at this year's Area AGM we need a new Chairperson to take over from George Greensides, who has indicated his willingness to become Area Vice chairman for one year so that he can assist whoever replaces him. Then at the November 2018 Area AGM, if elected, I will take over as Area Footpath Secretary meaning that we need someone to take on the post of Area Secretary.

Graham Evans: Area Secretary

Treasurer's Report.

In previous years we had requested funding below our needs to reduce our reserves with the intention of asking for the full amount this year. Unfortunately, Headquarters capped our payments by £1500

which meant that either we had to reduce funding to Groups or to Area. Whilst some Groups requested their allocated amount, several Groups budgeted for considerably more than this. This suggests to me that the formula is now outdated and should be revised as the expenditure asked for did not seem unreasonable, especially when bearing in mind that posting two programmes a year would cost more than the basic allowance allows.

However during the year it became apparent that some Groups had large reserves and this may have an impact for 2018 should our funding again be capped. The basic formula is that at the end of the financial year no Group, or Area, should have more than 40% of its annual expenditure in the Bank. Or to put it simply if annual expenditure is £100 then the account should not be more than £40 at the year end.

Fortunately, our expenditure this year was less than the previous year, including Group payments. Indeed, the only increase in Area expenditure was in casework, which is a reflection on how active we are in this respect. Casework is a vital part of Area expenditure and it is anticipated that 2018 will be equally busy, if not more so, as the number of obstructions on footpaths increases as Council funding is restricted.

Peter Matthews, Area Treasurer

Webmasters Annual Report

Another year has passed and I have enjoyed the challenge of managing the Web site. The website continues to grow. During the past 12 Months, many changes have been made to our Website mainly suggested by Graham our secretary because of the upcoming changes to the Data Protection Act

The Combined Walks program is no longer available on the Website as all groups have their own Web pages and their program is available there to be accessed as required. We have also removed the full list of Groups Contacts to comply with the upcoming Data Protection Act. The contact details for the groups are also on their web site if anyone needs them' Also I will be adding links to details of Health Walks, which are supported by The Ramblers, and relative contacts in our County. My Target here remains to cover all free walking events within the County of Staffordshire and where possible promote the meeting of new friends in the walking world.

Research into Health walks in Staffordshire is currently on-going with the target of providing a listing of all Health Walk schemes in the county of Staffordshire along with the main contact for each scheme.

If any Ramblers Member Living in Staffordshire has any suggestions as to things that could be included in the Web site contents please email me on glen@gscs.co.uk and I will fully investigate the suggestion and respond to your email with my findings and submit them to the council for inclusion in the web site

Glen Sibley Webmaster for staffordshireramblers.org

Membership Report

There has been an overall decrease in membership with only Chase and Staffs Walking Group showing an increase.

		Sep-16			Sep-17		
		Total	New/Rejoin	Debtors	Total	New/Rejoin	Debtors
NS01	East Staffs	248	3	3	242	0	2
NS02	Stone	213	3	2	201	2	4
NS03	StokeNewcastle	333	4	4	323	3	5
NS04	Lichfield	128	1	4	118	0	3
NS05	Mid Staffs	167	0	6	159	2	1
NS06	Stourbrdge	206	1	1	197	1	3
NS07	Wolverhampton	253	1	8	248	1	4
NS08	Walsall	172	4	0	163	0	3
NS09	Sandwell	144	2	2	132	2	3
NS10	Chase	101	1	5	106	2	2
NS11	Leek	117	0	2	117	0	4
NS12	Biddulph	126	2	0	123	1	5
NS14	Bilston	39	2	2	35	0	1
NS50	Black Country	80	2	1	68	0	4
NS51	StaffsWG	86	4	5	89	0	4
NS Area	TOTAL	2470	35	51	2384	17	50

The column debtors represent those members that are due to renew but have not yet done so.

Gerald Gittens, Membership Secretary

Access Report

As you will have read in the 'WALK' magazine, the Coastal Path scheme is still ongoing despite my pessimism of funding cuts. Even if the full programme is not completed by 2020, work is now in progress on all remaining segments. But, even now, erosion has forced diversions in Norfolk, so it will be wise to consult the website of Natural England for further information before planning a coastal foray.

The Peak District National Park body are in the process of doing a survey of all the present Park access points and would like public participation by identifying additional access points made by scrambling over walls and fences plus others that would be practical for easy access. This is our chance to help and influence the Park authorities on improving the use of Open Access. If you would like to assist this project, please e-mail to me grid-ref and detail that I can pass on to my contact at PDNP.

Persuading OS to mark their maps has not yet been successful but Harvey's have part done so and included other paths used by "professional" leaders and walk authors.

We worked hard for these spaces, let's further continue the good work to improve and enjoy them.

Eddie Dawson

Area Footpath Secretary Report

It has been difficult to make progress in resolving footpath problems due to the cuts at Staffordshire County Council and we are due up to another 50% cut during 2017/18. It is taking over 12 months to get problems resolved by the County Council, to their credit any dangerous problems are resolved quickly.

I am standing for election at the Area AGM, but this will be my last year. Graham Evans our Area Secretary is willing to take the job on and this will depend on us finding a member willing to take on the Area Secretary role. However, I will not stand for election in 2018/19, I will be 75 and it is time to retire. I will however continue as a District Footpath Secretary and support Graham if he takes over as Area Footpath Secretary.

The number of footpath diversion consultations received is down this year to only 9 consultations none of which have been

objected too. There has been an upturn in the number of planning applications received which has been for Staffordshire over 100. Our District Footpath Secretaries have investigated each application and replied to the Planning Authority when a footpath is affected. My thanks to our District Footpath Secretaries.

Notable footpath challenges this year, Hednesford Town footpath 5 diversion for house building, Cheadle footpath 18 proposed diversion to overcome obstructions, High Offley bridleway 0.1517 diversion, Tamworth footpaths 81 & 83 diversions due to quarry work, Horton footpath 21 diversion due to gas extraction, Brewood footpath 46 various obstructions, Fawfieldhead footpath 27 obstructions, Enville footpath 7, 8 & 9 diversions, Caverswall footpath 17 application to close path, Coppenhall footpaths 6, 14, 16, & 17, bridleways 7 & 28 diversions.

We now know the extent of the diversions for HS2, there are over 40 footpaths to be diverted. However, none of the paths will be lost, and as a generalisation all paths have been accommodated into the development. There will be temporary diversions while work to complete the new line takes place.

Work to add the missing footpaths and bridleways to the definitive map for Stoke on Trent continues and we are having regular meetings with Rights of Way Officer to discuss progress and offer volunteer help. Graham Evans has now completely taken on the role of the District Footpath Secretary for Stoke on Trent this year. Graham has done an excellent job and is a vast improvement on my involvement.

Harry W Scott

Canal and River Trust (CRT) Report

The 2016 report noted that the Central Shires Waterway was closing down, and was being absorbed into the neighbouring West Midlands, East Midlands and Manchester and Pennines Waterways of the CRT. The CRT has kept up its contact with waterways users who attended the Central Shires Waterways meetings. With assistance from Peter Matthews, Staffordshire Ramblers have attended meetings for canal users of all three waterways, with venues including Kidsgrove, Birmingham, Chasewater, Normanton on Soar, and Nottingham.

The meetings include a mix of the general public, boaters, business users (e.g. owners of marina and boat rental businesses),

anglers and cyclists. The CRT representatives are always open to questions, and there is frequently lively discussion. The meetings are very positive in tone. The CRT is under an obligation to make towpaths a shared space, and is very conscious of this. Nothing specific to Ramblers has come up in the meetings so far, but it is important that we have a presence. The meetings additionally present an opportunity to find out about major works to the canal system. For example, there is work planned for the Caldon Canal, including £1m being spent as part of the Stoke on Trent Regeneration scheme.

Judith Meredith

Biddulph Group Report

Reviewing the past year it is clear that the group continues to move forward. This is evidenced by the range and frequency of walks we offer, our well supported and varied social programme, the spirit of camaraderie in the group and the slow but steady increase in membership

Additional walking days have been added over recent years in response to members' requests. In addition to our original pattern of Wednesdays with alternating medium and short walks, along with fortnightly Sunday longer walks we now have monthly Thursday, Saturday and Sunday walks. All are viable. Longer distance Sunday walks have also been introduced. We remain a relatively small group and inevitably increasing the range of walks on offer has put a strain on an already stretched leaders' pool. Additionally, several of our more senior members, now need to curtail their contribution making the recruitment of new leaders a priority.

Our website, (www.biddulphramblers.org.uk), continues to expand toward our final aim which is the "perfect site". We are particularly pleased with the responses from our walk leaders as they continue to make use of the substantial walks archive of over 550 walks which we have built up over the last 6 years.

Monthly social events, instigated several years ago, are well supported and we feel there has been something of interest to all. This year has seen a holiday based in Newquay enjoying coastal walking together with three long weekends in Skipton, London and Llandudno. Day coach rambles have been enjoyed in Angelsey, Kenilworth and Warwick. We are grateful to our neighbouring Ramblers groups for filling the coaches on occasion. Evening socials are always well supported. Our winter social included a local history talk by Mervyn

Edwards with hot supper. The highlight of our social calendar was in July when we hosted a group subsidised party to celebrate our 20m Anniversary for 120 past and present members. A ukulele band concert, disco and excellent served meal were enjoyed by all. The pleasure that many members, both past and current, had meeting up again made it an evening to remember.

Two members, our Walks Coordinator and Footpath Secretay, are currently working on a project alongside the local council. The original six villages which later joined to make the town of Biddulph have all been marked with attractive commemorative plaques. Our members are advising the council by suggesting a range of walks linking the sites and checking the footpaths involved. Eventually, they may produce a town walks booklet based on these suggestions.

All in all an extremely busy and successful year made possible by the dedication of our leaders, social committee and enthusiastic walkers. We are now beginning to plan for 2018. As always the starting point is the suggestions submitted by members. Looking down the list it promises to be another exciting year!

Linda Drakeford, Secretary

Bilston Group Report

Bilston Ramblers is in a serious crisis. Since our formation in 1998 membership has gradually dwindled we now have a membership of 36 – most of whom take no part in the group's activities. We have a management committee to run the group's affairs currently there are 5 active members of the committee: myself as Chairman, Walks Programme Coordinator, Website Manager, Membership Secretary, Minutes Secretary and I'm working on Publicity. Barry Smith Vice Chair, Treasurer and Area Delegate. Jackie Tyler is Group Secretary with Jane Williams and Stephen Tyler as other members.

Since our formation we have produced a regular programme of walks, over the years the number of people prepared or able to lead a walk has dwindled currently there are 3 people leading walks on a regular basis, this is not enough to maintain a weekly programme so any future programmes are likely to consist of fortnightly walks. Proposals have been put forward that we should perhaps seek to do joint walks with other local Ramblers groups, I used to be an active walk leader, however my Partners (She was also a very active walk leader) deteriorating health has meant I can no longer commit to

leading walks on a regular basis. The other leaders are also finding it very demanding of their time, and none of us are exactly teenagers.

The situation has now become sufficiently serious that at our October Annual General Meeting a formal motion will be put forwards to close Bilston Ramblers. Without more active members, the group can't continue in its present form.

If the group continues into another year, then we need more volunteers take an active role to ensure the group has a future

The late Steve Spencer put a lot of effort into forming this group, and in doing so laid the foundations for some lasting friendships. It would be a shame for his legacy to die out in this manner.

Martin Peake, Bilston Ramblers Chairman

Black Country Young Walkers

Over the past six months, we have continued with our Sunday programme of walks of varying distances and grades. Our walks have been within Shropshire, Staffordshire, Worcestershire and The West Midlands, with a few walks further afield including one in the peak district and a couple in Wales. In addition to this, at the start of May, several members took part in the Dudley Trail challenge walk.

There have been two weekends away to Snowdonia – one in April and the other in July. Both weekends included walks on both the Saturday and Sunday, and opportunities for attendees to socialise on the Saturday evening. There was also an extended break to the Isle of Wight in May and a weekend to the Coltswoods in September. During the summer months, we have also included 16 mid-week evening walks. Most of these were very local to the Black Country and have run from early May to the end of Mid-August.

We have also put on some local socials for our members including comedy shows, a band night, a pub crawl, a camping event, watching the Perseus meteor shower and a music festival. Thank you to our committee members, walk leaders, event organisers and everyone who has taken part in continuing to make the group a success.

Mark Ridgway and Mark Gatenby

Chase & District

Almost a year ago our group were privileged to host the 2017 Area AGM including two local walks from Burntwood designed to cater

for our regular Sunday walkers plus visiting delegates. Thankfully, both walks were well attended, no doubt aided by good weather for November. It seems that on average this year we've had more wet Sundays, something all walk leaders would rather do without. I'm sure you know the feeling when it's your walk against a poor weather forecast and the rain is belting down when you wake up!

Our membership figures are up slightly so far this year with nine new members countered by seven non-renewals of "sleeping" non-walkers. Therefore and the ratio of actual active walkers to members has improved and remains high. We are currently running a monthly poster campaign which targets local leisure centres, libraries, supermarkets etc, in addition to small adverts in a couple of local services booklets, plus a weekly newspaper entry in The Chronicle advising details and a contact number for our next walk.

The group has once again organised a varied Walk Programme without relying too much on the regular well trodden routes. Within this there have been two weekends away. Torquay in April at the excellent privately owned Headland Hotel and in October at The Marine Hotel, Llandudno. Eve must be given credit for organising these weekends. In fact, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of our volunteers for their efforts over the past year, especially first time walk leaders Kristina, Phil, Dev, and Helen. Also Carol & John who are responsible for the bulk of our social activities such as quizzes, curling, and the annual coach ramble featuring a linear walk from Craven Arms to Ludlow.

With regard to notable individual performances Helen scaled Ben Nevis, Snowdon, & Scafell Pike within weeks of each other. Meanwhile, Gary & Mark successfully completed the notorious Leaden Boot Challenge in the north of our county, whilst Gary F's adventures saw him trekking and wild camping in the Borneo jungle.

Finally, my sincere thanks to our own membership for supporting our events throughout the year and indeed to those joining us from other groups on occasion. Without you all it simply wouldn't be worthwhile.

Barry Collis, Chair

Leek Group

Another busy year for the Leek Group, the climax being our 20th birthday celebrations.

The Leek group was formed on the 8th May 1997 and to mark the anniversary, a celebratory function took place at Horton Village

Hall at the end of June. Over 40 members gathered at the hall, joined by our special guest, Area Secretary Graham Evans to walk local footpaths to Rudyard Lake, returning to a buffet lunch. Members both past and present enjoyed a nostalgic collection of photographs, press articles and specimen walks programmes - one from each of the twenty years.

A special note of thanks to those committee members who helped put together this memorable event.

Our current walks programme continues to provide great variety. There is at least one Sunday a month offering a choice of three walks; a short easy (up to 4 miles), a medium (6/7 miles) and a longer walk of between 10 and 12 miles. A big thank you to all our walks leaders.

This year has seen an increase in social events with a New Year Dinner, quiz nights, and pub walks; all thanks to our newly elected Social Events Organiser. We also travelled to Criccieth for our annual weekend away in the spring. The Saturday circular walk was followed by a three course evening meal taken at our base, the Lion Hotel; and the next day we benefited from warm sunshine on a glorious walk back along the beach from Porthmadoc.

The group is now looking forward to hosting next year's Area AGM which incidentally will be held at Horton Village Hall.

Kevin Andrew

Lichfield & District Group

In the year since the last AGM we have put on 64 walks, mainly on Sundays, ranging from 4.5 to 11 miles. The additional short walks which we organised to take place on the days when the alternative is a particularly long or hard walk, have proved popular for those who no longer wish to do the harder walks. We also put on four evening walks starting and ending at local pubs. But after a certain degree of success last year, this time the short walks have failed to attract any new walkers to the group.

Recently, four new members have been welcomed on the longer walks, but their interest seems to have waned recently, leaving the number of walkers basically at the same level as last year.

Attendance on each day walked (i.e. adding long and short walks on the days when these are run together) has averaged 18, which is slightly better than what we've seen in the past. Thanks go to all our walk leaders.

Our Footpaths Team, led by Tony Grady, have been busy this year carrying out repair and maintenance projects virtually every month; the tasks have included clearing overgrown footpaths, erecting wicket gates and replacement stiles, and repairing bridges.

We organised a five day break in late May at HF Holidays Abingworth Hall near Arundel in West Sussex. 21 members enjoyed a thoroughly excellent week of beautiful weather and a number of different scenic walks in the South Downs, then coming together for sociable evenings in elegant surroundings. The week was so successful that we've organised another two breakaways – Harrogate in September this year and HF Lulworth Cove in May next year.

Ed Watson

Sandwell Group.

Thank you to everyone in our group who has helped to make this a happy year of walking together under the umbrella of the *Ramblers*. Needless to say, we have still got wet on occasions when the rain clouds have passed over!

With our AGM on the way, a reshuffle in the pipeline and my enjoyable three years as Chair completed, we continue to look at how best to run ourselves. In some ways, we are in a different world now to thirty years ago when, for instance, shops shut on Sundays, suitcases did not have wheels and webs were mostly associated with spiders rather than The Internet. There are now more demands on our time but also much easier ways of getting things done and communicating with each other. Our group – much like our neighbouring Staffordshire groups, and our arguably younger friends in the *Black Country Young Walkers* – is trying to adapt to this new world by finding new ways to keep everyone involved, and in particular to lead walks. At the same time, we wish to preserve the big heartedness and warmth that I associate with Sandwell.

Any difficulties and changes we might encounter in our group or in our borough seem less important when we are confronted by the permanence and variability of nature. As we walk along or climb a hill together, or sit down for sandwiches or view a landscape, we may stare up at a sky filled with clouds that look like the awnings of shops or suitcases with wheels or spiders at play.

Andrew Budden

South Staffs District.

This year has been characterised by the number of changes that have taken place to the footpath network. At the end of last year three footpaths and three bridleways were diverted and one footpath created in Coppenhall and Castlefields Parishes. All crossfield paths are now moved to the field edges and the path creation links them together to make a circular walk. Footpath No. 9 in the centre of the village is to be moved to the field edge to allow cows and calves to graze the field.

In Swindon Parish Wall Heath Quarry has now ceased operations and three paths around the site are closed with the creation of three new ones which are far more convenient for public use. In Hatherton Parish it is necessary to divert Footpaths Nos.7 and 8 as a new chicken farm has been erected and a new diversion will be far more pleasant away from the smells and bio-security. In Bobbington Parish the proposed Diversion of Footpath No. 24 which received a number of unresolved objections has gone to an enquiry with the Planning Inspector.

I have examined 24 Planning Applications so far this year with only two needing an objection and I have submitted a large number of complaints, some of which have been attended to.

John Gilmer, Footpath Secretary of the Stourbridge Group and Footpath Secretary for Kinver, Enville and Bobbington has now retired after many years. He has done a sterling job, dealing with many Planning Applications and organising many days of volunteer work, especially on the Enville Estate, erecting bridges, stiles and gates and clearance with his willing team of helpers. I'm sure we are all grateful for the excellent job he has done and wish him well in retirement. Bob Green from Kingswinford has now taken over from John.

David continues to carry out clearance work, sometimes twice a week, in many parishes. Stiles, gates and bridges get very overgrown in summer and he is kept busy. I have carried out clearance work in Pattingham and Patshull Parishes and waymarking of several paths.

The Mid Staffs Group continues to struggle along. After a rather turbulent AGM last November members voted to continue but no-one volunteered to take on any vacant role. The Group continues with a much reduced committee of six people of whom two are Secretary and Treasurer. Therefore little or nothing is being done to further the aims of the charity apart from a long walks programme on Sundays; a new member from Stafford has volunteered to organise some short walks

on Wednesdays.

I have been consulted on the West Midlands Interchange at Four Ashes, a Rail Hub for the distribution of freight. The application will be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate later this year. I have suggested that Footpath No. 29 be diverted around the perimeter through the green landscaping and this was received sympathetically.
Marjorie Cashmore, South Staffs District Footpath Secretary

Stoke/Newcastle Group

We have continued our core activities of regular Sunday half day, Sunday full day and midweek walks unabated this year, and have been blessed with relatively few rainy days so walk cancellation has been minimal. Once again, we are grateful to our cohort of able leaders which has been supplemented by some newcomers who deserve a special tribute for their inaugural events. These activities, and others, have been supported by our group committee which has also seen some changes. Our former chair, secretary and webmaster are now enjoying well-earned respite from the full extent of their former roles. That being said, those of us who are newcomers to the committee are grateful for their continued presence at meetings so their expertise has not been lost amongst the fresh ideas that new personnel undoubtedly bring.

Our use of electronic communication has been the focus of much hard work from our new webmaster. He has also assisted others to update their skills enabling our website (<http://www.stokeandnewcastleramblers.org.uk>) to be a genuine cooperative effort of which we can all be proud. Positive comments have been received concerning our blog and our searchable database of locally led walks. Of course, not all information is suitable for placing online and not all members are comfortable with IT, so our printed programme, enhanced by a new group logo, continues in parallel with these developments.

We now find ourselves in the enviable position of our group membership numbers stabilising after a period of decline. A balance may have been struck between new members joining and the sad loss of older former members. Thanks are due to our membership secretary and others who have organised and contributed to market stall displays and leafleting to advertise the benefits of Ramblers membership. We have also found the revised website to be a point of introduction for new members. Associated with our changing

membership, another recent group initiative has been the introduction of some 4-mile walks designed to appeal to both older and new walkers. Furthermore, our informal association with Biddulph Ramblers continues with respect to coach rambles and holidays, with Stoke/Newcastle members enjoying trips to Warwick, Malham, Stamford and Newquay. We very much hope this liaison will be sustained.

Of course, our footpaths are vital to ensure our enjoyment of our environment. This year our footpath mapping work has continued unabated and the growing efforts of our footpath maintenance team were recognised in Summer 2017 edition of Walk magazine (p.18). Since its reinstatement after a lull, the maintenance team have installed and renovated stiles, footbridges, finger posts and cleared fly tipping. Furthermore, secateurs walks have become a regular feature of our walks programme. You can read more at <http://www.stokeandnewcastleramblers.org.uk/footpath-work.html>.

We can finally, and proudly, reveal the result of our TV appearance alluded to in that last year's report. Yes, a team from Stoke/Newcastle Ramblers did beat the Eggheads. Walking seems to be good for the mind as well as the body.

Susan & Stephen Merry, Secretary

Stone Group

Summer has drawn to a close. As I'm writing this the rain is pouring down. We're told it's been a warmer than average August but I'm not convinced. However the weather doesn't stop the Stone Ramblers' from getting out and about. Our summer programme has been full and varied; we continue to offer 2 walks 2 days most weeks, along with holidays and social events. A huge thank you to all walk leaders this wouldn't be possible without you all. A special thank you to our programme co-ordinators Gerald and Pam who badger members tirelessly to submit walks and events and to John who does an excellent job on our website. In the main our walks are well attended. The leaders constantly come up with new areas to explore and paths we didn't know existed in our favourite spots.

A Ramblers holiday to Minorca was enjoyed by many in May and the Glen Coe HF holiday will have taken place in September. Using travel companies is a good way to arrange group holidays without the complications of sorting accommodation and walks. However two of our members Andy and Paul have put in the extra time

and effort to arrange a group holiday in the Lake District during October. The holidays remain popular and places are snapped up really quickly.

As well as the regular walks in the surrounding countryside leaders have organised trips to Walsall Town, Birmingham Canals and Historic Trentham. Those attending have learnt about their heritage whilst enjoying a walk.

The media is full of information about keeping healthy and it's well documented that the benefits of walking can be key to good health in old age. Several of our members are testament to this as they scramble around the hills and dales well into their 80's. The Walking for health group continues to promote and encourage people back to good health through regular short walks.

After a short break the working party are back in action busy repairing paths gates and stiles in the local area with support from the Council.

Our group continues to thrive and membership remains fairly stable. Long may it continue. Enjoy your winter walking programme.

Carol Skelton, Publicity Officer

Stourbridge Group.

We enjoyed the hottest June since 1976 and then mixed weather for the rest of the summer, with a variety of excellent walks including Evening Pub Walks for our boozy members. Also an enjoyable coach trip to Bath. We look forward to a weekend at Llandudno at the end of September with a walk over the Chirk aquaduct on the way up. We continue to rely on a relative small number of members who feel able to lead walks, so thanks to them.

At the last Area Committee Meeting at Penkridge other groups also said they were struggling to fill their calendar so at the end I spoke to representatives from Bilston and Sandwell with a view to partnership working. Bilston only walk on a Saturday and always use public transport so as an experiment we included four of their walks meeting at Birmingham Stations. Several of our members enjoyed a train/bus trip to Tutbury at the start of September. We also plan joint walks with Sandwell as both areas join our borders. This may be the way forward.

Rose Green Joint-Chair Stourbridge Ramblers

Walsall Group

Thanks to our volunteers we have put on 89 walks in the last year. Our social calendar offers a wide variety of events that are organised on a monthly basis. We have annual events that form the bulk of our social programme and then add a few more to keep it fresh. We have a short walk at Christmas followed by a meal, but it is becoming a challenge to find pubs that can cater for up to 50 of us and sometimes we have to set a limit.

The coach trip is very popular and we are always looking for somewhere new to visit. This year we went to Wells in Somerset and already are planning Cambridge for next year. We put on a short walk that leaves a few hours to have a look around afterwards, but to ensure we fill the coach, we invite “tourists” just to have a day out.

We had a Karaoke evening which was something new for us and despite a little apprehension, it turned out to be a really good night. We didn’t manage to uncover a potential winner for the X factor, but undaunted, we will try again next year. Despite requests, earplugs will not be provided!

Kevin Wilcox, Chairman

Wolverhampton Group, A Ramble with a Difference

Wolverhampton Group Ramblers featured in Alex Lester’s BBC WM Radio Breakfast programme as part his Summer Tour of the West Midlands taking in Stourbridge, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Tamworth. Alex presented his programme from a narrow boat at the start of each week and then hosted a walk along various waterways.

BBC WM presenter Alex Lester has a strong family connection to the Ramblers. Many of you may recall Dr John Lester who led fascinating and informative walks for Wolverhampton and Walsall Groups – remember those talks about sundials?!. He is still a member of our group but at the age of 90 only puts on his rucksack for very short walks.

On 10 July Wolverhampton Group was invited to join Alex Lester and lead a walk at the end of his breakfast programme. We met him for an early start at Autherley Junction where the Shropshire Union meets the Staffordshire Worcestershire Canal. There was only time for a very short stroll – 45 minutes! Not our usual kind of walk but we covered a lot of ground (3 canals!), observed by a heron for much of it. The walk also involved dodging cyclists and chatting to dog walkers. We saw some wonderful art work high up under the arch of

the railway viaduct crossing the canal. The artist must have needed a long ladder to get up there!

Alex was good company and chatted to us all in turn about our various interests and was pleased we remembered his father's excellent contribution to the Ramblers. It was certainly a walk with a difference and we all thoroughly enjoyed it.

Judith Rose

Next Issue

Will be published mid-April. Contributions please by 15th March 2018. If you do change your address please let Head Office and/or our Membership Secretary know, not the Editor as he does not have the membership list.

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